The 1931 Persian Art exhibition and its Templeton legacy

Persian carpet reproductions and designs by Templeton’s of Glasgow

Introduction
For my placement I was assigned to the Stoddard-Templeton design archive. My task was to catalogue and repackaged the Persian carpet designs and patterns, which were scattered throughout four large drawers. Upon completion of cataloguing it provided a contextual history for the designs.

Whilst cataloguing carpet designs, some were marked with V&A catalogue numbers and dated, which suggested that they had been copied from V&A designs. Further research into dates and catalogue numbers revealed that there had been an Exhibition of Persian Art, held in Burlington House, London in 1931. It became clear that Templeton designers had probably attended this exhibition, copied designs for inspiration purposes and possible future reproductions by Templeton.

The Persian Carpet in the West
Persian carpets have appealed to Western tastes for centuries, C. E. C. Tattersall, writing in 1934 accounted for their unaltering appeal by suggesting that “this adherence to a tradition that only gradually changed is the keynote of Oriental craftsmanship.”

Their vibrant colouring and vigorous design make a bold and powerful aesthetic statement. From their first arrival in Western Europe they have always retained those associations with rarity and luxury. They retain associations with power, privilege and masculinity.

The Victoria and Albert (then known as the South Kensington) Museum began a process of carpet collecting in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The acquisition of the Ardebil carpet raised the profile of this collecting practice. The Templeton archive contains many examples of carpet patterns copied from the V&A collection, some of these went into production, such as the Chelsea, Ardebil and Kum carpets.

The 1931 Exhibition
The Persian Pet exhibition of 1931 was the largest and most extravagant display of Persian art in Britain to date. It encouraged the publication of many books on the topic of Persian art, especially carpets. The 1931 exhibition followed in a Western tradition of the display of cultural wealth and prowess.

People could purchase art, to show off their artistic sensibilities in their home. Carpets fulfilled this purpose, for the rising professional classes, reproductions of exotic carpets could be bought for reasonable prices in department stores. Books were published on the subject of Persian art to educate and inform their aesthetic preferences. These carpet reproductions were a profitable venture for carpet companies, designers were sent to these exhibitions and museums in order to copy designs for production. Templeton’s were no different in this respect.

Designers and art students were encouraged to visit this exhibition, with special rates or opening hours especially for them. Many designs in the Templeton archive are dated from 1931.

Carpet reproductions
Templeton’s, like many other carpet manufacturers at the time, made reproductions of popular carpet designs.

Who purchased these? Templeton’s produced carpets for domestic use, but their biggest customers were hotels, cruise liners and even government buildings, at home and abroad. Persian carpets were popular as they still retained those allurements to grandeur, without the cost of purchasing a genuine oriental carpet. In a domestic setting, they take on a more intimate meaning, instead conjuring up romantic links with the exotic, suggesting a bohemian lifestyle.

In the 1930’s London was in the grip of a “Persian fever” and its only sensible to assume that this trend spread to the other cities in the United Kingdom, including Glasgow. Templeton’s readily responded to the latest consumer tastes. Their catalogues display various reproductions of famous carpets, such as the Chelsea or Ardebil, and include variations on colour schemes.

The Trinitarias Carpet
Carpet manufacturing firms acquired original oriental carpets to study them for design purposes, so they could copy them and reproduce them in their factories. In the case of Templetons they purchased a sixteenth-century carpet, the Trinitarias carpet, in 1948.

One section of a larger design taken from a carpet from the Palace of the Forty Columns at Isfahan (sketch dated 1931)

Copy of an Ardebil vase

Trinitarias carpet reproduction

Tracing of a border of a silk carpet lent by C.E.C. Tattersall of the V&A, dated May 1931

Variation of the Ardebil carpet by Templeton’s.

Contextual information on a sketch taken from a carpet from the Palace of the Forty Columns.

Reproduction of a carpet from the Florence museum by Templeton’s.

Variation of the Ardebil carpet reproduction

Chelsea carpet reproduction

Chelsea carpet reproduction on display in Templeton’s show room, circa 1947

Trinitarias carpet reproduction

The Templetonian, June 1938

Kum carpet on display, from The Templetonian, June 1938

Copy of an Ardebil vase

Sketch dated Feb 1931 of seventeenth-century silk carpet from Shah Abbas II’s tomb at Kerm, probably from Persian exhibition.

One section of a larger design taken from a carpet from the Palace of the Forty Columns at Isfahan (sketch dated 1931)